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### State takes up prison crowding

MONTPELIER — The number of Vermonters in jail, on parole or under the custody of the Corrections Department in some other manner has jumped from 3,037 in 1975 to just less than 14,000 in 2006.

That's not only a loss in human potential, but a staggering expense to Vermont taxpayers who have to shoulder the \$41,602 per inmate prison price tag, supervision expenses and other costs that climb with the corrections population. The annual cost of the corrections budget jumped to \$120 million in 2007 from \$16 million two decades earlier.

The numbers are so troubling to some state lawmakers that the House Judiciary and Institutions Committees are devoting every Thursday afternoon to understanding the problems and searching for solutions.

This Thursday, a representative of the Council of State Governments testified before the committees about what other states are doing to control the problem.

"I don't think building our way out of this is the answer," said Rep. William Lippert, D-Hinesburg, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee. Instead of building new prisons and work camps, the panel is reviewing sentencing options, probation and parole decisions, prevention efforts that keep people out of jail, reducing recidivism, even the role of parents in holding down correction numbers.

Among the questions the panels are asking:

- Has Vermont established too many new crimes?
- Is public and political pressure to lock up more people a cause of the problem?
- Is there any connection between increased prison population and gang activity in Vermont?
- Why is the number of women in the system increasing?

Corrections Commissioner Robert Hofmann said Thursday night he welcomed the focus being placed on his department and the pressures it is facing. He said a new national survey expected out as early as next week will show the numbers continuing in the wrong direction into the future.

"I really think there's fertile ground to make progress on this because we've got smart people with good intentions that — whether they are conservative or liberal — they all have an interest in working this out," Hofmann said.

"If you're someone who doesn't want to see taxes increased, you are interested in this. If

you're someone who cares about safety in the community, you want this to succeed. If you care about the humanity of the families of the victims or the perpetrators, you're interested in this," he added. "People are yearning for a solution."

The House committees are also reviewing the numerous recommendations made to the Legislature over the years to address this growing problem, going back to the so-called Bristow Report in 2001.

Cornelius Hogan, the former Human Services secretary who co-chaired a task force three years ago that recommended needed steps to control prison costs, said he welcomed the House's renewed focus.

"The big problem they're facing is that the overcrowding is moving ahead more rapidly than their ability to respond at this point," Hogan said of the Corrections Department. "They need to think beyond incremental solutions if they're ever going to get a handle on this."

Not only are more inmates ending up in prison or living under supervision outside of jail — which requires additional taxpayer-funded staffing, supervision and services — but the population is aging. That means health care costs associated with this population will continue to grow.

Hogan's group called for more work camps to house low-risk offenders in a cost-effective manner while also securing services for local communities and job training for inmates, locator devices to allow more inmates to serve their time under house arrest and other changes to reduce expensive prison populations. The goal was also to free up in-state prison beds so more Vermont prisoners could return from out-of-state jails.

Few of those proposals have been implemented, he said. The Corrections Department has been conducting a pilot project to test the house-arrest monitoring devices; and to date no community has agreed to accept a work camp for low-risk offenders.

"I just worry that the slowness of the pace of change is going to leave them in an awful situation in the very near future," Hogan said. Crowding and other problems can create a crisis situation, he said.

It's not clear, even to the Judiciary Committee, what is creating the growth in corrections. Some of the increases are because of a jump in sentences for certain crimes. For example, the number of convictions and prison sentences for sex offenders has climbed from 31 in 1979 to 247 in 2005, the department reported.

Lippert said the House committees will talk with a broad range of experts inside and outside of government to clarify the problems before then looking for fixes. He said he does not expect the committees to recommend significant legislation to tackle the corrections problem during the current session, but anticipates comprehensive and thoughtful proposals in 2008. However, Hofmann said he is hoping for changes during the current session.

"We had our heads so deeply into the day-to-day crises in corrections," Lippert said. "Someone needs to think more broadly and strategically about how to address this issue, where it (the number of inmates) just grows and grows."

## PULLQUOTE

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Corrections Commissioner Robert Hoffmann

Box:

By the numbers:

25% increase in women in prison since 2000

5% increase in men in prison since 2000

41% parole approval rate

24% increase in number of inmates incarcerated for drugs

2 escapes in 2006

87 lifers in prison

9.1% of inmates are over age 50

\$110 million spent on Corrections in 2006

Source: Vermont Department of Corrections

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